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**Strategic  
Warning  
Staff**

**SPECIAL REPORT**

**USSR-IRAN: A SHIFT IN POLICY?**

**11 APRIL 1980**

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## Forward

It is the function of the Strategic Warning Staff to provide a thorough airing of serious alternative explanations of key intelligence issues with strategic warning implications. This report examines alternatives different than those agreed to in the 13 March IIM on Soviet Intentions and Options in Southwest Asia: Near Term Prospects. Evidence that has become available since the 7 March cutoff for that document suggests an alternative and more ominous view of current Soviet policy toward military intervention in Iran.

*This special report is the product of the Strategic Warning Staff and has not been coordinated with the rest of the intelligence community. Comments were solicited and incorporated at the discretion of the Strategic Warning Staff. Questions or comments on this report should be addressed to the Director, Strategic Warning Staff,* [REDACTED]

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## USSR-IRAN: A Shift in Policy?

*Although the USSR would clearly prefer to achieve its broader aims in Iran without using military force, Moscow's frustration over relations with Iran, its clandestine activities there and its recent military activity in the Caucasus suggest that at sometime since December the USSR opted to step up its support for ethnic dissidents and exploit the ensuing disruption even to the extent of invading Azarbayjan.* [REDACTED]

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1. The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan has entailed some real near-term costs for Moscow's policy toward the Khomeini regime. Recent Iranian criticism of the USSR's dealings with its own Muslim population coupled with Iran's apparent efforts to increase support for unrest in Iraq and Afghanistan likely have been viewed with concern in Moscow. The prospects of a consolidated Islamic Revolutionary regime in Teheran taking steps to export its revolution to the Muslim areas of the USSR has probably led to nervousness in Moscow. In addition, the Soviets have indicated dissatisfaction with:

- Teheran's support of the UN resolution calling for the removal of all foreign troops from Afghanistan.
- Iran's participation in the Islamic Conference.
- Iran's movement toward closer cooperation with Pakistan.
- An electoral system for the National Assembly which is disadvantageous to the minority parties, virtually insuring that the pro-Soviet Tudeh Communist Party remains an insignificant political force in Teheran.

The National Assembly, which will apparently play an important role in determining Iran's future policies, seems almost certain to be dominated by Islamic radicals who will reaffirm most of these anti-Soviet trends. It also probably will encourage the regime in Teheran to embark on policies more hostile to Soviet interests in the area. [REDACTED]

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2. As a result of trends within Iran, Moscow may have concluded that in the coming months the regime in Teheran will move to crack down on the Tudeh party for backing Moscow and to increase aid to the Afghan

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rebels conspicuously. Moscow probably believes that the government in Teheran will be predisposed toward policies hostile to Soviet interests and its ideological orientation will become more anti-Communist and anti-Soviet. [REDACTED]

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3. At the same time, a government increasingly influenced by Islamic radicals will probably deal more stringently with minority demands for self rule, which could lead to increasing instability in areas such as Azarbayjan and Kurdistan. These same radicals are inclined to interfere in the internal affairs of neighboring nations, especially Iraq, to the extent that hostilities with these countries have become a strong possibility. Moscow may view such developments as providing it the opportunity to step-up its involvement in northwest Iran even to the extent of employing military force under the pretext of a threat to security. The Soviets might, for example, view a conflict between Iran and Iraq as an opportunity to intervene on the behalf of one of them or on behalf of an "autonomous Azarbayjan Democratic Republic."

4. Although we are uncertain over what specific event may occasion Soviet intervention, Moscow's response to the renewed suppression of Tudeh would probably be limited to verbal criticism while increased Iranian-supported Afghan rebel activity would likely lead to cross-border operations by the Soviets. In recent weeks, the Soviets both in public and private statements, have expressed concern over the direction of events in Iran and indicated that increasing instability and civil war on its southern borders would be intolerable, suggesting that harsh responses such as military intervention within the terms of the 1921 treaty would be necessary. [REDACTED]

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5. Although publicly disavowing any hostile designs on Iran and attempting to present itself to Teheran as a deterrent to U.S. aggression, we believe Moscow's activities over the past two months suggest a shift toward a more active exploitation of instability in Iran, including preparations for a limited military intervention. Indicators of this shift in Soviet policy include:

- if required.*
- A marked increase in clandestine activity in Iran and especially in the Azarbayjani-populated areas of the northwest.
  - Sending large numbers of ethnic Azarbayjanis back from the USSR including prominent exiles dating from the post-war Soviet sponsored Azarbayjan Democratic Republic.

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- Apparent reactivation of the Azarbayjani Democratic Party which closely cooperates with the Tudeh Party.
- Aid to ethnic dissident groups, including arms and guerilla training.

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In the aggregate these indicators lead us to believe that a military intervention in Azarbayjan has become more acceptable to Moscow. We believe, much if not all, of the military preparations and activities that we see in the Transcaucasus Military District are reflective of a shift toward an option to intervene. It is harder to explain these activities as a whole in terms of general preparedness unrelated to some special new contingency planning.

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The Transcaucasus in this sense appears to be a special case related, we believe, to special Soviet activities in Iran.

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6. Based on public statements to the Iranians and on Soviet military planning, Moscow does not appear to be especially apprehensive about the possibility of a direct military response by the U.S. to a Soviet invasion limited to the Azarbayjan area. Barring the involvement of Turkey, the planners in the Kremlin are almost certainly aware of the logistical difficulties the U.S. would encounter in trying to deploy rapidly sufficient numbers of ground forces to that part of Iran. Moreover, as long as the Iranians hold the US Embassy hostages, Moscow is likely to assume that the U.S. President will have difficulty in mobilizing the U.S. public opinion in favor of military action by the U.S. to restore Iran's territorial integrity, especially where oil is not directly involved. In view of this, the USSR might judge that a limited military option, not extending to the oil producing areas, has a relatively low risk of direct military confrontation with the U.S. In invading Azarbayjan the Soviets almost certainly would invoke the 1921 Soviet-Iranian Treaty as a legal justification--as they have already been doing obliquely in the press--and might also claim that they were invited by the Azarbayjan Democratic Party or the Tudeh Communist Party. [REDACTED]

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7. Nonetheless, such a venture would be seen by the Soviets as extremely serious and would probably require some additional high level deliberations before a final decision to invade. For example, the CPSU Central Committee Plenum, which may be held again in late April or May, could be used as an opportunity to form the broader consensus within the Politburo. The last CPSU Central Committee Plenum, in late November, was almost certainly used as an occasion for the full Politburo to ratify the decision to intervene in Afghanistan one month later. After such a decision, the Soviet military would probably be able to move much more swiftly against Iranian Azarbayjan than it did against Afghanistan. The current posture in the Transcaucasus would enable them to move more quickly, significantly reducing the time period during which unambiguous warning could be given prior to the initiation of military operations. What appears to be a higher level of readiness among the cadres of the ground units is likely to reduce the amount of time required between mobilization and an invasion. [REDACTED]

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9. The Soviets, on the other hand, have not yet taken the economically expensive action of mobilizing the 30,000 to 60,000 personnel which would probably be called up for an Azarbayjan operation. Based on past Soviet performance, firm evidence that large numbers of reservists are being assembled in the Transcaucasus would be a clear indicator of impending hostilities. [REDACTED]

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10. [REDACTED] we believe that the Soviets have already deliberated over the general proposition of intervening in Iran either covertly or by invasion. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] The situation in the Transcaucasus leads us to conclude that reservist and equipment mobilization may be [REDACTED] indicators of a Soviet move on Azarbayjan. Although policy level deliberations over actually implementing an invasion plan probably would also provide indications. [REDACTED]

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